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The Untold Story

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Chinese Americans in Hollywood

Award-winning director, Arthur Dong talks about his latest project “The Chinese in Hollywood”

“I’m excited about partnering with the Center for Asian American Media,” says director Arthur Dong about his latest documentary The Chinese in Hollywood Project (working title).

The ambitious film is a fascinating exploration of the Chinese experience and their representation in American cinema, including turn-of-the-century archival footage shot in China. Dong also includes well-known works such as *The World of Suzy Wong*, the 1960 film that launched Nancy Kwan’s career and the 1961 Asian American musical *Flower Drum Song* and contemporary films such as Wayne Wang’s *Joy Luck Club* and Justin Lin’s *Better Luck Tomorrow*.

Dong says the initial idea for the film began ten years ago when Deanne Borshay Liem, Executive Director of NAATA from 1993 to 1996 and Janice Sakamoto, Director of Programming and Media Fund from 1990 to 2000, encouraged him to apply for a grant. Three years later Dong dove into the project when he received \$40,000 each from CAAM and the National Endowment for the Arts. “Then I could really get into the research,” recalls Dong. “It was a very part-time job before that.”

Dong is no stranger to research. Many of his earlier works delve into the past and incorporate archival footage. *Sewing Woman*, which CAAM began distributing in 1982, tells the story of his mother's arranged marriage in China to her immigration to the U.S. and includes scenes of rural villages in China and home movies. *Forbidden City U.S.A.*, premiered in 1989 at CAAM's Film Festival, chronicles the heyday of the famed San Francisco nightclub showcasing Chinese American performers. *Coming Out Under Fire* tells the story of gay and lesbian World War II veterans through interviews and archival footage.

As Dong worked on *The Chinese in Hollywood Project*, he found old Nickelodeon films of Chinese people at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. And he even got involved with film preservation when he discovered the existence of a 1916 silent film *The Curse of Quon Gwon* directed by a Chinese American woman from Oakland, California. The family was looking for a place to take care of the film and the Chinese Historical Society in San Francisco referred them to Dong, who at that time was a governor of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Luckily, he was able to get the nitrate film restored and preserved. "The print is pristine because it was never really released."

"What Arthur's doing is incredibly rare—covering film history and scholarship from an Asian American perspective," says Donald Young, CAAM's Director of Programs. "We didn't know we'd be delving into preservation."

"This film will be the definitive story of how Chinese have been depicted over the course of history," says Stephen Gong who has been an advisor on the project right from the beginning, long before he became CAAM's Executive Director earlier this year. Gong also appears on screen, providing a historical perspective throughout the film as he comments on stereotyping, the history of Chinese Americans, and images of Chinese in the media and on screen.

"There are so many untold stories," notes Dong. "I wanted to see an evolution of the imagery of the Chinese from the beginning of cinema. And I wanted to hear personal stories about working in the industry."

In addition to archival footage and film clips, Dong interviews many actors, directors, and writers discussing their experiences of working in Hollywood and their opinions about the portrayal of the Chinese in cinema. Several of the interviewees such as veteran actor James Hong, novelist Amy Tan, and Oscar-winning director Ang Lee discuss yellowface—Caucasian actors portraying Asians, which was a common practice in Hollywood for decades.

"By and large the argument is always against yellowface," says Dong. "What surprised me was hearing from some Chinese and Chinese Americans that we have to understand the times and that there is the question of freedom of artistic expression." For example, Amy Tan says that Anna May Wong's expectation of being cast in the role of O-lan in the 1937 film *The Good Earth* was probably not realistic at that time.

Remarkably, some of the Caucasian actors who played Chinese roles more than 40 years ago are still alive and Dong was able to interview them: Christopher Lee who starred in the *Fu Manchu* films of the 1960s and Luise Rainer who played O-lan in *The Good Earth*. Lee comments that he "tried to play someone of great dignity."

"I love old movies," says Dong. "I always wanted to be a film historian ever since I was a kid." And with this film, his dream has come true. If all goes well and he is able to get the rights to all the film clips, his plan is to premier *The Chinese in Hollywood* and the restored version of *The Curse of Quon Gwon* at the 2007 San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival.

"The film represents what the Center for Asian American Media is all about—telling our own stories," says Stephen Gong. "And that's what it's all about."

If you are interested in supporting the film, please contact Stephen Gong at (415) 863-0814, ext. 103

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